Comprehensive Management Plan

Mississippi National River and Recreation Area

SUMMARY

The Mississippi is one of the world's great rivers and part of one of the most complex ecosystems on the planet. It is a critical migration corridor for millions of birds and is essential to the ecological health of the North American continent. The river environment is home to an incredible array of fish, wildlife, and plants. In turn, millions of people use and enjoy these diverse resources. The Mississippi River lies at the heart of what is American and more than any other natural feature is an unmistakable symbol of this nation. The Mississippi is one of the most recognized historic transportation routes in our country, and it is a corridor rich in nationally significant cultural resources. It is of spiritual importance to Native Americans and provides recreational opportunities to millions of people every year. The Mississippi is also a working river. Commercial navigation is important to the economy of the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area and the entire upper Midwest. The Mississippi is a vital commercial transportation link to national and international markets, providing safe, low-cost movement of bulk commodities in river barges.

On November 18, 1988, Public Law 100-696 established the Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA) as a unit of the national park system. The system is composed of over 370 areas administered by the National Park Service (NPS), an agency of the U.S. Department of the Interior. The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area was established by Congress to (1) protect, preserve, and enhance the significant values of the Mississippi River corridor through the Twin Cities metropolitan area, (2) encourage coordination of federal, state, and local programs, and (3) provide a management framework to assist the state of Minnesota and units of local government in the development and implementation of integrated resource management programs and to ensure orderly public and private development in the area.

The Mississippi National River and Recreation Area includes 72 miles of the Mississippi River and four miles of the Minnesota River and encompasses about 54,000 acres of public and private land and water in five Minnesota counties, stretching from the cities of Dayton and Ramsey to just south of Hastings. The segment of the Mississippi flowing through the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area has always been of major significance as a resource, a boundary, a transportation corridor, a source of sustenance and energy, a place for recreation, an artistic inspiration, and a tourist attraction. It has been a home and work place, a source of water, and a sometime sewer. Demands upon it have often been in conflict, and attempts to manage its resources have frequently challenged state agencies, local governments, organizations, and area citizens.

In 1988 Congress charged the secretary of the interior (through delegation to the National Park Service) with coordinating the efforts of the federal, state, and local governments to keep this 72-mile section of the Mississippi corridor in good condition and enhance its resources. Congress also mandated that a Mississippi River Coordinating Commission be appointed to assist the secretary in developing an integrated resource management plan for the national river and recreation area. The commission was appointed by the secretary in May of 1990 and has worked in partnership with the National Park Service and many other agencies and groups to develop a plan for managing the river corridor.

Congress directed the commission to assist the secretary, the state of Minnesota, and local units of government to develop policies and programs for

- the preservation and enhancement of the environmental values of the area
- 2. enhanced public outdoor recreation opportunities in the area
- 3. the conservation and protection of the scenic, historical, cultural, natural, and scientific values of the area
- 4. the commercial use of the area and its natural resources, consistent with the protection of the values for which the area was established

The basic visions and concepts identified for the national river and recreation area promote extensive partnerships between the corridor's political entities and various constituencies to create the desired future and achieve the legislative purpose for the 72-mile-long corridor through the Twin Cities area. Natural areas will be preserved, appropriate treatment of cultural resources will be ensured, economic resources will be protected, and public use will be enhanced.

Major issues include land resource protection efforts, commercial navigation needs, park land and recreational facility opportunities, and the role of the National Park Service in preserving, interpreting, and managing the national river and recreation area corridor. The plan, as directed by the legislation, is a conceptual policy and program-level document concentrating on corridorwide issues. It provides basic visions, broad concepts, and general policies that could be used to preserve resources, provide for visitor use, and manage land and water use throughout the corridor. Except for proposed NPS facilities, it does not address site-specific issues.

After a great deal of study and consultation and after receiving and considering comments from a wide range of individuals and groups, the commission and the NPS study team developed a plan that provides a framework to balance and coordinate natural, cultural, and economic

resource protection, visitor use, and sustainable development activities. It will minimize adverse effects on the river corridor and conflicts between users while providing for a broad spectrum of land and water uses and managed growth. It will protect fish and wildlife resources and emphasize the importance of biological diversity in the corridor. Corridor management policies will be applied in a practical manner with individual communities retaining flexibility to respond to unusual situations in special ways providing that the resources identified in the MNRRA act are protected. The most significant visual resources will be protected and restored where practical, including historic structures and landscapes. The river corridor will have continuous public or private open space along the shoreline to the maximum extent practical, and it will be connected to the downtowns and neighborhoods by open space and trails. This continuous open space might be a combination of public parks, trail corridors, and private land along the river that is retained as, or restored to, green space. It will be as wide as some of the existing major regional parks along the river or could be as narrow as the 40-foot shoreline preservation setback area. Except in existing commercial and industrial developments, downtown areas, and historic districts, the riverfront and bluff area will appear mostly natural from the river and its shoreline areas (as observed from the opposite bank). In downtown areas and historic districts, development will be more visible but still complement the aesthetics of the river corridor, appealing to area residents and serving as an attraction to visitors to the metropolitan area. Where the natural appearance has been altered in other areas, design guidelines and programs will be established to encourage shoreline restoration to a more natural appearance.

This plan adopts and incorporates by reference the state critical area program, shorelands program, and other applicable state and regional land use management programs that implement the visions and concepts identified for the corridor. This plan does not create another layer of government, but rather stresses the use of existing authorities and agencies to accomplish the policies and actions developed for the area. Land use management consistent with the MNRRA plan will be encouraged through an emphasis on incentives, which will include a grant program authorized in the MNRRA act (if funded by Congress). Local government will retain local control of land use decisions in the corridor, consistent with applicable state and regional land use management programs. This plan will not prevent new development or expansion of existing development in the corridor that is consistent with state and regional land use management programs. It is not a regulatory document and does not mandate actions by non-NPS entities. The National Park Service and the commission do not have approval authority over local plans and ordinances, and they do not have authority to approve or deny projectspecific land use decisions. The MNRRA legislation specifies that NPS regulatory authority in the Code of Federal Regulations, 36 CFR, only applies to lands that the National Park Service owns — envisioned in this plan to be

less than 50 acres.

Additional public and private open space is a critically important resource in the corridor that will be stressed in plan implementation. Such space will be provided through a continued local land and easement acquisition program. The goal will be to provide a continuous linear open space and trail along the riverfront in most of the corridor while protecting natural, cultural, and economic resources. Open space will include public and private land that will be retained as primarily undeveloped. This might include land devoted to active or passive recreational use or land retained for visual or natural resource protection purposes. Some undeveloped areas will be acquired by local governments on the upper river (above the I-694 bridge) for open space, although it is not feasible during the life of this plan to acquire a continuous public open space along the upper river due to extensive development. Where a riverfront trail is not practical, the trail will use available corridors such as nearby streets and utility easements. The potential for additional open space increases in the middle part of the Mississippi below the Minnesota River and is greatest in the lower river area (below the I-494 bridge). It is recognized that there are areas in all three portions of the corridor where a continuous public open space along both sides of the river is not practical. There will be an emphasis on working with local agencies to complete trail connections to provide a continuous trail system along or near the river and link with other areas outside the corridor.

This plan recognizes the importance of economic activities and provides for the commercial use of the corridor consistent with the MNRRA legislation. Economic activity has the ability to preserve nationally significant historic and economic resources, and this is encouraged by the plan. However, this document is not an economic development plan for the corridor.

Commercial navigation activities will be continued. Decisions about commercial navigation and facility activity will integrate the needs of the industry with the needs to protect natural, cultural, and economic resources in the corridor and provide for safe commercial and recreational traffic within the limits of river system capacity. River system capacity will include considerations of physical, biological, social, and safety limits. Local governments will continue to designate areas suitable for barge fleeting in corridor plans that are consistent with this plan. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (COE) and Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) will review these community plans for conformity with the commercial navigation policies in the MNRRA plan. The National Park Service will review permit applications for fleeting areas under its legislated review responsibility.

A wide range of visitor use (interpretation and recreation) activities will be encouraged that will emphasize selected areas. A variety of passive and active

resource-related recreational activities will be available to visitors in the corridor, including fishing, hunting, boating, canoeing, hiking, bicycling, jogging, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, picnicking, birding, taking photographs, and participating in interpretive and educational programs.

The Park Service will have a lead role in coordinating interpretation for the corridor. Because of the nature of the corridor and the management concept, NPS facilities will be limited to interpretive centers and administrative offices. With the partnership arrangement and the extent of local interpretation, these will be cooperative ventures with only one interpretive facility owned and operated by the National Park Service. Based on the audience, site analysis, functions of each facility, and the interpretive themes, a system of interpretive facilities is proposed. This proposal capitalizes on the excellent interpretive work already being done in the corridor and seeks to fill the interpretive gaps and offer overall coordination of activities.

There are two major interpretive facilities planned — a primary information and orientation center at Harriet Island opposite downtown St. Paul and a cooperative information and orientation center near downtown Minneapolis. The St. Paul/Harriet Island facility will be combined with the MNRRA administrative headquarters, strategically located to continue extensive interaction with the government agencies included in the MNRRA partnership.

Three smaller cooperative interpretive centers are also planned, one in the Hastings area, one at Fort Snelling State Park, and another at Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park. Each will have a different interpretive emphasis and potential visitor experience.

This final plan is the product of an extensive planning process that involved the preparation and comparison of a draft plan and three alternatives. Impacts of the proposed plan and the three alternatives were assessed in several drafts of this document. Both positive and negative impacts on natural and cultural resources, visitor use, and socioeconomic environments were analyzed. The series of draft documents was reviewed by the National Park Service, by the commission, and by the public before the plan was approved by the governor and sent on to the secretary of the interior.

Many individuals, organizations, and agencies have contributed to the planning process. Work groups made up of local technical experts assisted the commission and National Park Service team in developing visions, collecting data, and making recommendations for the plan. Public meetings and several newsletters have offered opportunities for public involvement. An extended public review occurred on the Draft Comprehensive Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement, including a series of open houses and

public meetings in the summer of 1993. Hundreds of letters were submitted regarding the draft plan (see final environmental impact statement, volume 2, October 1994). Continued citizen participation will be critical to the successful implementation of the plan.

In a letter to the secretary of the interior dated September 14, 1994, Governor Arne Carlson recommended that the comprehensive management plan be approved.

PLAN SUMMARY BY ISSUE	
Issue	Action
General Concept	Balance and integrate sustainable use and resource preservation needs
Land use/landscape character	Preserve and restore natural appearance of shorelines and bluffs; protect habitat; protect historic areas; preserve economic resources; provide setbacks and screen new uses with vegetation
Riverfront area land use (within 300 feet of shore or the floodplain)	Emphasize river-related and river-enhancing uses; minimal change to existing development (i.e. some riverfront improvement)
Barge fleeting areas	Monitor effects; activity expansion will integrate the needs of industry with resource protection and river system capacity
Open space/trails	Provide a continuous linear open space and trail where practical; acquire sensitive areas and emphasize resource protection
Park landownership	Minimal NPS land; additional local park land
Resource management	Balance resource protection and use; increase pollution reduction efforts; preserve biological diversity; protect cultural and economic resources; facilitate and coordinate research
Visitor use	Provide broad range of activities in appropriate areas
Park Service development/cooperative interpretive facilities,	NPS interpretive/administrative facility in St. Paul and major cooperative interpretive center in Minneapolis; small cooperative centers at Coon Rapids Dam Regional Park, Ft. Snelling State Park, and Hastings area
General management strategy	Extensive partnerships
Land use management/monitoring option	Land use management/monitoring option, Emphasize incentives. Improve state and regional land use programs. NPS develops agreements with Metropolitan Council to review local plans and DNR to review local actions for conformance to MNRRA plan